

The Sharing Of Oversight Authority

The Senate has reached a compromise that will put into effect the central recommendation to come from its committee's inquiry into intelligence activities: a single oversight committee with legislative and budgetary authority. However, the new committee will have to share its authority with four standing committees whose past performance as intelligence watchdogs the inquiry criticized.

The effectiveness of the new arrangement will depend, to a large extent, on the vigor with which the members of the oversight committee, who will be appointed by the Senate party leaders, exercise their powers. But the creation of a committee responsible solely for intelligence is expected to improve considerably the Senate's ability to control intelligence operations.

The report of the House of Representatives' intelligence inquiry recommended the establishment of an oversight committee in that chamber also. The House has not yet acted on the report.

The Senate compromise was reached between a group of younger legislators, intent upon asserting greater control over the intelligence agencies and an old-guard faction determined to protect the jurisdictions of the standing committees, which are dominated by Senators with substantial seniority. One of the principal findings of the inquiry headed by Senator Frank Church of Idaho was that the fragmentation of authority among the four committees, Appropriations, Armed Services, Foreign Affairs and Judiciary, resulted in ineffective supervision of the agencies.

The Church committee, meanwhile, in a supplementary report, has described a secret unit within the Internal Revenue Service that had selectively enforced the tax laws against political dissidents. Donald C. Alexander, who now heads the service, said that he did not consider it necessary to notify the 11,000 persons and organizations in the unit's files of what had happened to them but that he would preserve the files until Congress acted on a bill to force their disclosure.

The report said that the practice of selective enforcement had been found in the Internal Revenue Service and reached a peak under President Nixon.

The Army Opening Mail

Among the findings of the Congressional investigation of the Central Intelligence Agency was that the agency had opened and photographed mail between the United States and Communist nations, a practice of dubious legality. The practice began in 1953 and supposedly ended in 1973, but now evidence has come to light that the agency may, indirectly, still have access to mail sent outside the United States.

The evidence was provided in the form of affidavits filed by Army Secretary Martin R. Hoffman in civil suits brought against the Federal Government by the Socialist Workers Party and by a group of American citizens living in West Berlin.

In the affidavits, Mr. Hoffman acknowledged that Army intelligence officers had opened mail sent between West Berlin and the United States and said that the Army "conducts monitoring of postal and telephone communications within its sector of Berlin or itself and other United States investigatory agencies." One of these agencies, apparently, could be Central Intelligence.

The Army contends that its mail openings had been legal because the mail was outside United States postal channels. It also maintains that it is authorized to conduct surveillance overseas, so long as its activities comply with the laws of the host country, but that surveillance could only be used against Americans abroad with the approval of the Army Secretary.